The Artistic Possibility of Words

by Robert D. Quinn

In Mrs. Cotter's Pre-K classroom, *wiggly*, *squiggly*, and *swervy* are exuberantly proclaimed as students attempt to give name to the abstractly painted black area near the center of Miss Judy's painting (see Figure 1). Juan leaps from his cross-legged position with his hand piercing the sky.

Figure 1. *Untitled, Miss Judy, Mixed.*

This scene is a snapshot of an arts integration lesson conducted in an elementary classroom at Boulevard Elementary School in a northeastern Georgia town. The students were asked to give name to the qualities they perceived in a work of art. Miss Judy, a preservice art teacher, guides them through this activity.

"I see a street . . . a black street!" Juan screams. A split-second of silence overtakes the room, stilling the 19 other squirming 4- and 5-year-old bodies.

"Okay," Miss Judy consents, "tell me what you think is happening on this street." Her probing questions conduct electricity through the children's arms, causing them to stand as erect as lightning rods.

In this lesson, students were asked to connect art to language in imaginative ways. They embarked upon this endeavor by first perceiving the qualities present in the painting. Then, students were to give names to these qualities by finding words that seemed to describe the qualities most accurately and richly. In so doing, these youngsters were employing a type of critical thinking skill by synthesizing visual information with the emotional and intellectual experience they were having with the work of art.

While many students stretch their arms in an effort to be called upon by the teacher, the eager pulsation of Maria's arm catches Miss Judy's attention. Maria matter-of-factly concludes, "I see a man walking on a black street with swerving cars." Her idea flies across the room and away into the crystal blue sky of possibility.

The educational goal of the exciting work with which these students were engaged was to write a poem, as a class, that gave voice to a painting. Students were asked to capture the essence of the shapes, lines, colors, and textures seen in the painting by choosing descriptive words that captured those essential qualities. In the lesson's introduction, Miss Judy and her cohort read from a collection of poems, all of

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which were created to give voice to works of 20th century American art (Greenberg 2001). Engaging 4- and 5-year-olds in poetry was accomplished effectively through the use of visually rich artwork. More importantly, these youngsters were given the opportunity to think in terms of qualities, which is a higher order thinking skill. Dewey (1987, 52) put it this way: "To think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical."

The Challenge

Boulevard Elementary School's students are a rapidly changing mixture of Latino, African-American, Asian, and European-American children. Ethnically and linguistically diverse, these students have found themselves at the center of a struggle to get test scores up, and expenditures down. The faculty, staff, and administration, after a recent accountability finding of "Needs Improvement," have been reaching out to the community for help. With everything that is in them, the members of that community have answered the call by creating innovative partnership programs.

At the local university, the preservice elementary education students I instructed in art education were coupled with preservice art education majors to implement an interdisciplinary curriculum in the general classroom at Boulevard Elementary School. The partnership program significantly impacted the way that our teacher education programs were conducted. In this case, educational objectives of the art education and general education methods courses were altered to reflect the importance of the interdisciplinary approach to teaching. Some major goals of the courses were to examine and implement ways to integrate art into other core subjects in general classrooms; to develop art lessons from core subject learning objectives; and to build relationships. These objectives were brought to life through the process of planning, preparing, and teaching arts-rich lessons about the power of words.

The Power of Words

The curriculum was called *The Power of Words* and was based on the artwork of Joseph Norman (Taylor 2003). The images contained in Norman's work and the manner in which they have been drawn were used to encourage students to think carefully about the way they speak to one another, their teachers, and their parents. One of the selected works, *Target Practice: Take This! Take That!* (see Figure 2), is filled with images of a hammer, nails, and a piece of wood. Rendered powerfully in black and white, the nails have been twisted and gnarled as they have been driven into the wooden block. After looking closely at the artwork, students were led through a discussion of the imagery in an effort to achieve comprehension of the artist's use of visual qualities and metaphor.

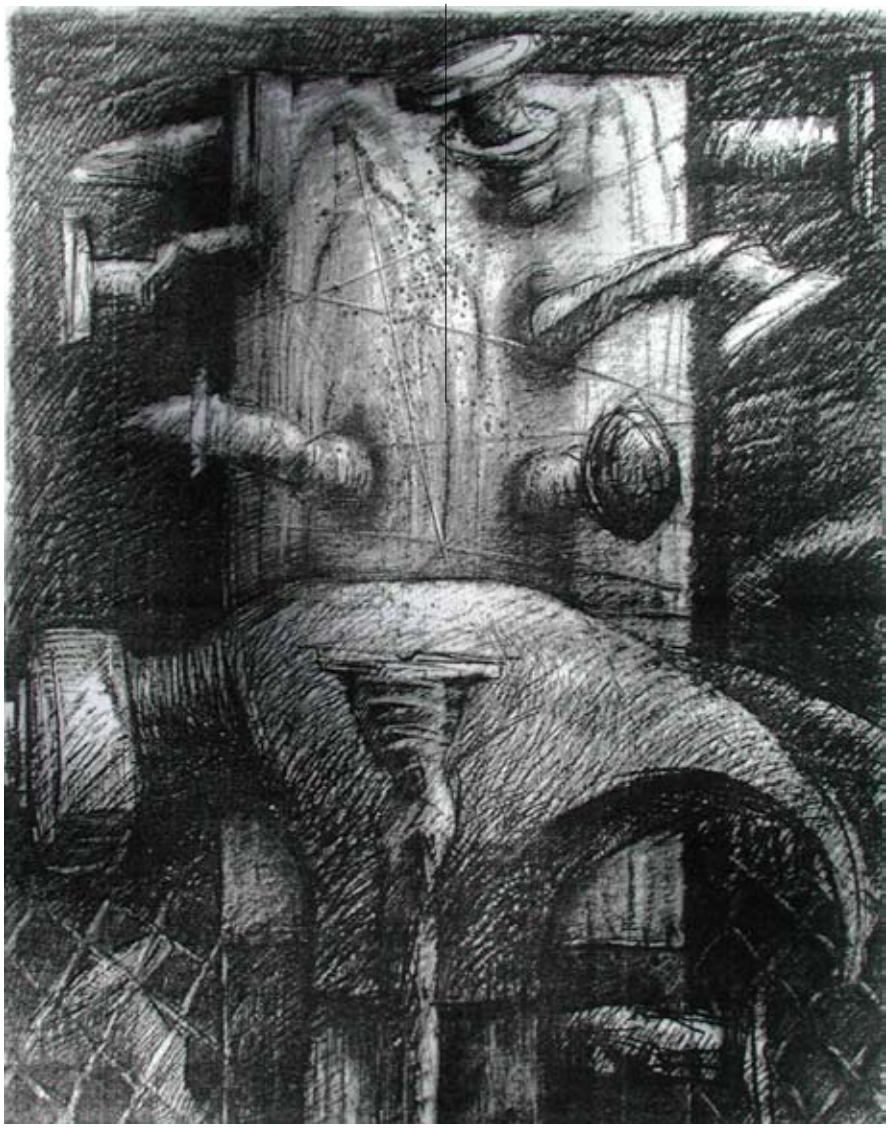

Figure 2. *Target Practice: Take This! Take That! Joseph Norman, From the series Life with Heather, 1994, Charcoal and ink on paper, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Promised gift of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph A. Chazan.*

Teams of preservice art and generalist teachers worked collaboratively to design arts integration lessons, centered on Norman's work, which would meet the educational goals of Boulevard Elementary School while providing a learning experience that would use the power of words and the power of art in tandem. Their experiences in the school spanned five weeks, with contact time occurring every Friday for half an hour. They worked with lessons they developed as extensions of *The Power of Words* curriculum. In these lessons, arts integration tactics were employed to foster within the students a sense of the ways that colors, shapes, values, and textures work to express and elicit feelings and moods (Toll 2003).

The success of the lessons was contingent on the students being given the opportunity to work with visual qualities in nonverbal, hands-on ways *first*. Without having hands-on lessons with texture, shape, and color, the students' efforts to decipher the qualities of works of art would have been in vain. Wexler (2004, 23) iterated: "Traditionally, the nonverbal nature of the visual arts allows access to expression that is often verbally out of reach." The empowering nature of art is what provides passage to the strongholds of language.

The Power of Art

In Mrs. Brannon's fourth-grade classroom, students are seated at their desks, patiently awaiting the introduction to the art lesson. Miss Erin, one of the preservice teachers, enthusiastically addresses the children, and then she and her team of preservice teachers embark on a thorough review of the previous week's lesson.

"Who can remember what we talked about last week?" Miss Erin asks. One little girl in the back of the horseshoe slowly draws up her head, resisting the desk's magnetic pull.

"Symbols," she offers. Miss Erin answers with positive reinforcement, inviting other students to engage in the conversation.

"Feelings!"

"Still lifes!"

The line has been cast, and the students are hooked. Miss Erin carefully navigates the waters. "Good! What is a symbol?" She realizes that she may have begun to reel in the catch too quickly. "What symbols did you all make last week, and what do they help you remember?" she recovers.

"A fan. It helps me to cool off," remarks one of the eager children.

"A clock. To stop and count to ten," adds another.

"A mirror. It helps you see how your feelings look," recalls a little girl with wispy black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Later, I have a chance to chat with her about her work. She wears a purple long-sleeved sweatshirt that matches the warmth of her smile. Leslie is her name.

"What have you drawn here, and why did you make it?" I impose.

She holds up drawings of three objects—a telephone, a mirror, and a clock—which she has cut out of colored construction paper. "We are making symbols and dealing with feelings. I've drawn this telephone because I know that when I'm happy, I can call one of my friends to share my good news."

Closing Thoughts

Leslie, like many of her classmates, had done something significant. She had taken a visual prompt—the nails, hammer, and wood of Norman's work—and related it to her experience. This personal connection to the universal language of art had allowed her to think more deeply about the intangible aspects of her life that can be reflected upon, and thereby made concrete. Perhaps more importantly, many of these children have effectively discovered, investigated, and manipulated the qualities of visual artworks to unlock their potential to become more fully human.

This interplay between the language of art and the written language is what contributes to the success of this program at Boulevard Elementary School. I see students make the impossible leap from their dissociated realms of experience, riddled with language barriers and academic disdain, to the imaginative domain where anything is plausible and everything is worth the risk. Allowing children to have the opportunity to dream is possible through the arts. And the arts, at least for the children of this school, are the keys to language.

If it is true that "keys are stronger than the doors they open" (Brookman 2002, 151), then the keys given to the children at Boulevard Elementary School are strong indeed. The school has seen a dramatic increase in student performance over the past two years as a result of this program and similar programs that have been implemented by members of the partnership. Certainly, the arts integration lessons my students taught are not solely responsible for the remarkable turnaround, but they are a contributing factor. I believe this is true because the students at Boulevard Elementary School not only learned lessons about art and language as a result of our work, but they also learned how to be perceptive as they work together to better themselves and their community.

If such results are valued in your community, teacher education programs might use such an approach to preservice teacher training. In-service teachers also might gain valuable collaborative and interdisciplinary experience for the benefit of their students. Several important factors should be considered when implementing a similar program in your educational institution.

First, general educators must see the art specialist as a resource in curriculum planning. Second, these two parties must be willing to partner in planning curriculum and teaching lessons. This means that college professors and school administrators must facilitate such activity by allowing time for these teachers to plan *together*. Third, thematic units of interdisciplinary instruction are most suitable for such arts-rich lessons. Units of study centered on themes such as compassion, caring, giving, or unity might be integrated into all subject areas most successfully.

> "Allowing children to have the opportunity to dream is possible through the arts."

Last, and most importantly, the culture of communication that has flourished in this program must begin early! The preservice level of teacher education is the place where such a spirit of camaraderie and teamwork should begin to provide the way for invigorating interdisciplinary curriculum design.

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